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Sophomore Honors English, A3

30 March 2015

The Tallest Poppies

*“On the high bench, boldly,*

*I’ll drink beer with the gods;*

*hope of life is lost now,*

*laughing shall I die!”*

*- The Krákumál*

“Form up, boys!” It is Högström, our unit commander, cantering towards us on his brown courser and yelling commands in a hoarse voice. “Battle arrangements! We are set to ride!”

“What?” asks Stark, whom I can see through the trees on my right. “Captain, not five minutes ago Marshal Rehnsköld ordered the retreat.”

“Been a change in orders,” our *Kapten* says, with a leer. “Our generals couldn’t make up their minds, so the damned Muscovites made it up for them. Look.”

We turn our attention away from the musty swamp we have been attempting to navigate and towards the Russian camp. In orderly ranks, like ants in a line, men are marching forth in the thousands. As I squint to look at them, they seem more numerous than the multitudes assembled at the Throne of God on Doomsday. What little sun makes it through the clouds overhead gleams off the large artillery pieces wheeled forward and shines off their muskets, sending brilliant rays of right in our direction. It looks like a mighty river has burst its banks and is surging forward as one massive flood. Indeed, the Muscovites have decided the issue for us.

We will not be able to make any sort of retreat; we are blocked off from the the west by the swamp, to the south by the Russian redoubts, and to the north by the Petrovka river. There will not be any way that we can escape, not without being wiped out by the Russians. Our only option is to fight.

“God in Heaven,” whispers my gambling partner Hasselstrand, who has for the past few minutes been attempting to free his horse from the mire below us. Had this been any other time, I would have cautioned him against using the Lord’s name in vain; men have been shot for less. But now, I nod in silent assent. In front of us, the somber air awakens like a field of wheat after a long winter. The entire Swedish army is changing modes, from hasty retreat into readiness for battle. I hear a cry for the artillery to be brought forward, and grin bitterly; what four pieces we have are behind the Russian redoubts, far to the south. Meanwhile, it seems like the Russian supply of guns is endless. What the Tsar doesn’t know about training soldiers, he makes up for in artillery.

For a moment, I had a little hope that I might make it out of this campaign, travel back to Sweden, and live out the rest of my days in a farm on the shores of Lake Siljan. But now, the dread that has been with me since we marched into this damned Cossack territory returns. This whole campaign has been a disaster since its inception. It started off well enough, just after Fraustadt, when we freed Poland from the Russian yoke. We marched south, towards Moscow, full of high hopes and great cheer, knowing the Russian army couldn’t stand against us.

The Russian armies never defeated us, but the thrice-damned Russian winter came close. The Tsar burning his own land to the ground just finished us off. I have seen more men dying in those last six months than anytime else in this war, or anytime else in my entire life. The path we have blazed into the Hetmanate is littered with mass graves, body upon body heaped into a pit and given hurried liturgies by a chaplain. Of the men who left Mora with me, those seven years ago, only a single infantryman remains. And, if the reports about the destruction of Roos’ force is true, he himself is no longer alive.

Now, on June 27, this year of our Lord 1709, it appears that we shall reach a conclusion. In a way I prefer this; I’d rather a quick death, by sword or musket-ball, rather than the long drawn-out horror of starvation and dysentery. I cannot see anyway out of this. If only we had the soldiers we did at Narva, or Fraustadt! Our army of some 40,000 men has been halved. Our invincible warrior king, Karl XII, was shot in the foot two days ago at the walls of the city of Poltava. As they say in the marketplaces of Mora, luck never gives; it only lends. Well, now luck has came like the tax-collector, rapping on the door and demanding his due; and I fear we shall have to pay in full.

In front of us a little ways, as I try and convince my horse to head back towards the Russians, I see our infantry move slowly like a great cog in a mechanical clock. It appears we are committed now, as companies of men march into battle formations, directed by the hand of an unseen puppeteer. For all of our ragged uniforms and torn banners, there is still a dignity present in our army, if a more solemn one than the majesty we possessed marching down into Russia. I am reminded of a sculpture I saw once outside of the church in Mora, of St. Mikael battling the dragon. The saint had an expression that was almost sad, as he looked down upon his mortal enemy; sad and noble, both at the same time. I imagine that the dignity our army had at that moment is the same present in the faces of the angels, when they look down upon our wars and murders and crimes.

I can only hope that if we fall here there are enough Swedes to defend our fatherland. I know as well as any other man that the ambition of this new Tsar, Peter, knows no bounds. It was he, after all, who started this war, ordering his pet Danes to invade us. When I was a young lad, I was always hearing stories about the *Ryskas*, the Russians. The older men would stare grimly at us as they told us the Russians would come and murder us all, and that the new king wasn't going to be able to do a thing about it; he was young and inexperienced, after all, not a real man like his father. The new king turned out to be untouchable in battle, and for a while I knew we would win, and maybe we still will. But it will not be today.

“Damn it all, move!” yells Högström, riding forward, spurred on by fear as much as anger. I nudge my horse, Rökiga, and she hesitantly picks her way through the untrustworthy ground. Far in front of us I can see the commander of cavalry, General Kreutz, motion all units towards him with a wave of his blade. It will take time to ride out on the field, tangled as we are in such treacherous ground. But slowly and surely we begin to move towards the Russian encampment.

“ ‘S a hell of field, though,” says the cavalryman next to me. I can’t recall his name, but I remember the face, the angular cheekbones and the long curls of brown hair. Rumor had it he murdered a man in his hometown and volunteered for the army to escape the man’s kin. All I knew him for was his fondness for his pipe and his calm face around the card-table. “No potholes or nothing to trip a horse up. Not a devil’s thing that can stop us when we set to charge.”

“Nothing except them.” I gesture to the Russians, still filing out from their barricaded camp.

“Those heathens?” asks the man, scoffing at the last word. “They aren’t soldiers, Svård. If a man knows how to hold a bayonet the right way the Tsar’ll let him into his army.”

“You might be right, but that makes some hundred thousand bayonets waiting for us over there.”

“And hell, Svård, they don’t have the Good Lord on their side. I hear those damned Russians worship statues, not even true gods. Sacrifice to them and everything. Trust me, they’ll run as soon as they catch sight of our *värjas*.” The man grabs the hilt of his *värja*, the rapier that sits affixed to all of our saddles and pulls it free. “Either that, or they’ll be impaled on three feet of Swedish steel-”

An earth-shattering roar drowns all conversation out, and I look up at the Russian lines to see a wall of smoke drift towards us. Ten seconds later the ground bucks beneath us, sending our horses rearing in panic. I am sent flying from Rökiga’s back, landing painfully on the side of a small gully and crashing through the overgrowth into a scummy creek.

I sit there for a moment, trying to gain my bearings, and look up. The ravine is not large, but is thickly overgrown with long, leafy plants, and I cannot see a single Carolean soldier. It is another moment before I realize what that means.

There will be another few minutes of general confusion while the army regroups. If I move quickly, I’ll be out of sight before anyone notices I’m gone. I can slip away into the forest, here, and make for the camp. I could take a packhorse, a spare gun, and ride to the north. Hell, within a month I’d be back in Sweden.

Quickly, I rise into a half-crouch and begin to creep away. I have to remain focused here. If Högström catches me he’ll shoot me without a second thought. He shot a man five days ago for using the Lord’s name in vain; he wouldn't mind wasting a bullet on a deserter. But as I make my way along, eager thoughts creep into my mind. To be back in Mora again, the town where I was born and bred and the town I’d never leave again for the rest of my days. To see the tall spire of Mora Church, and the sun shimmering on the waters of Lake Siljan! I’d be able to visit the farmsteads of my sisters, work a day in their husbands’ fields in exchange for a hearty meal and a night of laughter. I’d be able to see my father again, who surely must be even more stooped with age than when I left him, and cut grain in the fields alongside him once more. I’d be able to idle my winter days by the fire, not dig holes in the frozen ground to shove corpses into. I’d go hunting in the fields with my friends, shooting down elk rather than men. And I’d be able to see my sweet Ingrid again, and we’d be married some day in May when the flowers are in bloom. We’d grow old together, and be happy and content until the end of our days.

Shouts from above bring me back to reality, and I try to crouch down, but it is too late. The overgrowth is brushed aside, and Stark and Tapper are there above me, pulling me out of the ravine.

“You all right, Svård? Saw you fly over here somewhere, and I feared you’d broke your neck,” says Stark as he spits out some tobacco. I nod, and Tapper hands me the reins to Rökiga.

“You’d better mount her quick, lad. Högström’s yelling loud enough to raise the dead afore judgment day.”

“Devil take him,” I say, swinging up onto my horse in a single movement. I never could have made it, of course. I would have been shot at the Russian redoubts; hell, Sparre couldn’t get past them, and he had a whole company with him. Even if I could make it past those I would have had no food, no supplies, and my only clothes our blue and yellow uniform. If the Russians win here, and kill Mazepa, any Cossack would shoot me on sight. And I don’t know how to get to Sweden. But still, I silently curse. The dream of home is a hard one to rid myself of. Truly, I never realized what a nice thing I had until I left it. It has been only two years since I left, during the summer of 1707, and yet it seems like 200 years; if you told me that Gustav Vasa was king when I left home, I would have believed you. And now, after what has seemed centuries of fighting for my home, it does not seem like I will ever see it again.

All I can hear now are the massive explosions of the Russian bombardment. Smoke and dirt fly into the cloudy sky, obscuring the sun in a thick haze. The lack of light makes it no easier for us to emerge from the swamp, but emerge we do onto the grassy field. The landscape before us used to be pristine, a testament to the skills of nature. Now it is pockmarked with craters, and soon it will be pitted and churned. Water once fed this grass, but soon it will be blood. When the pastor at home talked about *helvete*, hell, I had no idea what he meant. Now I know. This is *helvete*.

“Look there,” says Tapper. I follow his command and stare across the field, where a massive unit of cavalry has assembled, replete in green majesty. “Those’re Menshikov’s boys. The ones we were fighting earlier this morning. The ones we sent running.”

“Well, it’s time we finish the job then, and kill those *horunges*,” growls Stark, and I nod in agreement as we ride into battle formations. It won’t be long now before the battle commences, and I know that I will most likely not survive, yet I feel strangely calm. There’s nothing left to do now, except one final charge.

“Pistols out, gentlemen!” roars Högström as he rides in front of us, fire in his eyes. “We fire once, and then let the heathen dogs taste our steel!”

Slowly I reach for the gun tied to my belt, tugging it free with a single pull. Rökiga whinnies, below me, and I urge her two steps forward as a shell whistles to land in front of our lines and send the earth flying. The sound is just one more in the general cacophony, the chaos of shouted orders and screaming cannonballs, of neighing horses and praying men. I smile bitterly, realizing these are the last sounds I will ever hear.

The drummers begin to beat out a rhythm and the clarions began to wail, like the dying song of a swan. The great machine of the army begins to advance forward now, playing a funereal march punctuated only by the percussive blasts of the shells. And then, we stop on the plain, for one final moment, as we assess the long wall of the Tsar’s troops.

This is where it will end, I know that now; on a field far to the south in the land of the Cossacks, never again to see the shimmering waters of Lake Siljan or the dusty paths leading from our farm to the field, lined by trees and brush. Never will I see my father, the old farmer, who toiled ceaselessly day in and day out for my family, and never again will I see my sisters, who right now must be cooking a fine breakfast for their husbands and farmhands. And never again will I see Ingrid, or hear her laugh like the lark’s song in the spring.

“Oy! Svård!” It is Hasselstrand, sitting to my right. “The forty riksdalers I owe you. Here they are, and not a copper daler less.”

“I’ll collect ‘em back in Sweden,” I say, as the drums stop.

“Charge!” roars Högström. “*Gott!* *Mit!* *Uns!*”

Without much thought I kick my horse into a gallop, leaning forward as Rökiga pounds away across the ground. It is oddly calm now, as we rush forward in a last desperate rush, a wave of blue and yellow surging forward to crash upon a shore of green and red. Though I hear the screaming of the shells and the roars of our men, I do not think of them, do not think of the awful hell that has been this campaign and its thrice-damned conclusion. Instead, strangely enough, I think of the timbered hall of Der Andersson’s farm, seven years ago, on the last night before I left to war. He had invited the whole damn village, and we conscripts were the guests of honor. Old Joakim broke out his fiddle, as did Kalle the Finn, and soon the night was lit up with the music as they strove to outdo one another. Ingrid and I danced, long into the wee hours in the morning, as the soldiers and the farmers around us sipped from the cask of aquavit and laughed. Finally, as dawn broke, we parted with a final kiss, and I rode to join the army of our king. In all of this campaign, it is only on this one final charge I recall this memory.

The memory brings a smile to my face as I urge my horse forward. If Fate has decreed that I will die here at Poltava, then I will die here at Poltava, but I will not go down without a fight. I owe the people of Mora that much.

A shell explodes next to me, but it does little to impede me as I thunder on. My pistol is pointed straight now, and softly I cock back the gun and pull the trigger. The gun ricochets in my hand, and I throw it away without looking to see the results of my shot. Instead I draw my sword with the other hand, looking up to see the lines of Russian cavalry come closer, look to see them raise muskets, and then we are upon them.

The point of my *värja* leaps into a Russian, and I pull it free and stab his comrade. A musket ball flies into my left shoulder, but I feel no pain as I continue to ride forward, sword ducking and leaping like a fish evading a net. Nineteen years of life I had, and I made so little of it. I never got to confess my love to Ingrid, never got to see more of my province of Dalarna, never got to own land of my own. Instead I killed, starved, and died fighting for my king. Was that any sort of life with meaning? Did I have anything at all, really?

For the last time, I smiled. Is that for us to decide? All we can do is live our lives the best way we see fit, and then, we let the Lord God decide. I had lived my life, and now I was to be judged, and I could only hope I was found worthy.

A dull pain shoots through me, nothing more than an annoyance, and I look down to see blood gushing from my chest. A stray musket-ball, perhaps, or the thrusting spike of a partisan had ripped open my heart. Even as I notice that, I see that the Russian cavalry has broken under our attack, that Menshikov’s men are sent reeling. Even as the inexorable Russian masses move forward to envelop our army, even as the artillery destroys our infantry, Kreutz’s band of cavalry has pushed the Russians back. History will write down with her iron pen that the Russians won at Poltava, but that Menshikov could not withstand the fury of a few thousand Swedes and their swords. If nothing else, I am given that thought.

I drive forward, as my life’s blood spills from me onto the green grass, my blade not as quick and my vision not as sharp as before. There is no pastor to administer me last rites, but I know the prayer by heart, and I sing it to the heavens as a long sabre rips through me. “*Fader wår, som äst i himlom, helgadt warde ditt Namn, Tilkomme ditt rike: Ske din wilje, såsom i himmelen, så ock på jordene…”*

I am ripped from my horse, and fall upon the bloody field of Poltava.